

Tape #30
Interview with Gery Porter
Date: 8/27/08
Transcribed by: Hanna Walicki
Checked by:

Tape #30

00:23

CD: Could you talk about what life aboard the battleship was like?

00:29

GR: Well I joke about uh going to machinist school, and one thing they didn't, couple of things they didn't teach us in machinist school was how to scrub bilges and shine floor plates down in the engine room, which was uh, what the new man on the station did, that was me. But generally after you got used to the routine, and battleships were pretty much regulation, and uh, it was really uh **(1:00)** nice duty 'cause the ships were well kept, you knew the routine, you knew what you had to do, and you knew you had time off. So uh, there was no questions about what tomorrow held, you just did your job and took your liberties when you had 'em and that sort of thing.

01:20

CD: What was the battleship to you, was it more than just a duty station?

01:26

GR: Well of course, uh being a battleship I thought it was the greatest ship in the Navy. It was uh, one of the biggest ones, the West Virginia happened to be the newest one we had at the time and uh, aircraft carriers were sorta something I didn't know anything about, at the time, I thought battleships were the main outfit. But uh, I was proud of it, I, I liked it, we had a good ship, we had a good skipper and I really **(2:00)** enjoyed it.

02:02

CD: What was relations like among the crew on the battleships?

02:06

GR: Pretty, pretty good camaraderie I would say, there was tensions among men at times like when you get any group of men that close together, there's gonna be a little riff now and then. But by and large uh, pretty good relationship and lotta good friendships.

02:29

CD: Where was your battle station in the ship?

02:33

GR: Normally, before I went on mess detail it was in the engine room. And that's where I would have been, had I not been assigned to mess detail, but

all these what you would call special detail which included compartment cleaners and mess men, uh, our battle station was in the motor room, center motor room, just dead-head. And uh, so we didn't have any really workstations **(3:00)** per say. And when we completed our three months of special detail duty we'd go back to our old stations and that sort of thing. That's why I'm hear today, because nobody got out of the aft engine room after it happened.

03:16

CD: Could you um, December 7th, the morning, that Sunday comes around, could you walk us through your day, what you saw, what you heard, what you did.

03:26

GR: Well, revelry was at six, we cleared the decks as I said, cots and hammocks went in the storage bins and I set up mess detail and mess tables for our section, you lay out all the plates and silverware and what not, get the food from the galley, and bring it down and set it, and pass it around and everybody eats family style. That was completed and I was washing the dishes...when we heard the first bomb drop over on Ford Island **(4:00)**. Right near, I think that was the first one we heard. They sounded the um...some other call for uh, emergency service momentarily and then immediately followed that with general quarters over the loudspeakers.

04:26 - Crew pauses to fix sound.

05:01

CB: Take us back, just before general quarters was called.

05:05

GR: Well we heard the first bomb, I think it was the one on Ford Island, on the hanger and uh, soon after general quarters sounded and we knew something other than just a, some kind of a practice run by the army or somebody, which the first commented 'what's the Army doing on a Sunday morning?' So we headed for general quarter station and uh, it normally would take me about 45 seconds I would say to get from where I was to my battle-station. I got about half way there when the first torpedo hit the ship, I did a Donald Duck in mid-air, and came down on top of a, a uh mess bench, which is what we used for seats, and uh got back on my feet **(6:00)** made a few more steps and then another torpedo hit (laughs). I lost my footing again but I finally got down to my battle-station before any more hit and then we kept getting hits and I wasn't counting at the time, I understand at the time that we got seven all together torpedos. But uh, we lost power, lights went out, we lost telephone communication and we had a battle lantern with weak batteries and we were in the dark wondering what to do, no instructions, the ship listed really badly, we thought it could possibly capsize. It might have had they not counter flooded, which righted the ship pretty much back up to about 10 or so degrees, listed to port. And

we settled on the bottom and about that time somebody opened the hatch (7:00) up above and told us to abandon ship. So we did, we went up the ladder and worked our way up to the topside and the quarter deck and uh, I don't know just when the Arizona blew, when it was before I went in that time or not but, just as we got up on the quarter deck there was some dive-bombers makin' a run on us, so several of us ducked into the nearest doorway which happened to be the ships library...and uh, closed the door to avoid strafing and uh, possible shrapnel or whatever. Just to seek a little safety. And while we were in there a 500 pound projectile fitted with fins for a bomb hit our number 3 turret which was just aft of where we were but it may be 50 feet away. Went through the top of the turret, didn't detonate (8:00) And as a man, uh I know he's down in San Diego, who was in the number 3 turret on the other side from where the bomb hit and although he was injured he survived. We lost several men in that. And uh, after things died down a little bit and got quiet again we walked out on the quarter deck, 'cause we'd been told to leave the ship and go over on Ford Island. And uh, I think it may have been while I was library that the Arizona blew, and it was just aft and inboard. We were tied up to the Tennessee and the Arizona was right behind the Tennessee. So uh, things looked pretty bad about that time, but we went on over to Ford Island across the Tennessee's deck and got over to Ford Island and reported in to the marine barracks, where we were told to go (09:00). And we were there during, the rest of the first wave of attack I think and word was passed out for the West Virginia crew to report in over to the officers quar...uh, club, which was a few buildings over, for muster, and we started over there and the second wave started in. So we ducked into one of the hangers and uh, tried to get out strafing, 'cause they were shooting everything and uh, eventually we made it over to the officers club about the time the second wave ended. We mustered in, formed up work parties, and I got, I got a detail to go back on the ship and fight fires on the quarter deck. And because we had no fire pressure or hoses we used buckets and bucket brigades, did that the rest of the day, spent the rest of the day there. Till about dark that night, they sent a relief crew (10:00) and we were about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, somebody brought us some sandwiches and a pot of coffee and boy it sure tasted good (laughs).

10:13

CD: Can you describe the condition of your ship when you went back on board to fight fires?

10:17 **Crew talking**

10:37

CD: Could you talk about the condition of your ship from when you went back on board to fight the fires? What did it look like?

10:45

GR: Well the ship was uh, sitting on the bottom of course, and it was listing so

the uh, port side of the quarter deck was under water. About a foot of water maybe, and it came up **(11:00)** maybe 10 feet up on the deck. The mid section of the ship, super structure was on fire and I couldn't see up forward of that I don't know what the condition was up ahead of that. But mainly the super structure and bridge and everything was on fire and uh, what we were doing was trying to put out fires below the decks on the after section.

11:33

CD: Can you describe the scene of battleship row, when you finally came out and saw what you saw?

11:40

GR: Well, 'course immediately forward of us what the Oklahoma and it was capsized, inboard of the Oklahoma was Maryland, it was, had bomb damage. We were sitting on the bottom partly awash and burning. The Tennessee was inboard of us and they had received some bomb hits **(12:00)** and I think some minor fires. And, behind the Tennessee was the Arizona and of course it was just unbelievable to see something like that, you couldn't believe a ship could be in that condition. And it'd literally, blown apart and the super structure was bent over like it'd just melted, like melted glass or something. And there was oil, fuel oil in the water all around the ships and quite a bit of it was on fire and the fire was approaching the Tennessee's stern and they had fire hoses out there trying to keep the oil pushed back so the fire wouldn't get to the ship. And that's about the sight of it, the Nevada had gotten under way, it had been aft of the uh, Arizona. But they had gotten it under way and it had pulled around, you know and they got partway **(13:00)** and the Japanese concentrated on it and damaged it so badly they had to beach it so it wouldn't sink in the channel.

13:12

CD: What was, what as your thoughts and feeling as you saw all this?

13:18

GR: Disbelief, it was, it was hard to grasp and accept what was going on, you knew what it was but you didn't want, you didn't want to accept it. But uh, it didn't take long to realize that hey this is it (laughs) this is really happening and it had happened but at first, uh you didn't want to accept it.

13:45

CD: Were you involved in any of the recovery efforts?

13:47

GR: No, no, I was not because the, the following day after spending the night in the uh bleachers of the recreation center, they gave us matters and blanket, **(14:00)** and we spent the night there and the next day I went on a work detail on the uh, Nevada, to unload their freezers because they had lost power and they didn't want to lose all that frozen food. So I worked all

day on the Nevada unloading sides of beef and that sort of thing and uh, that pretty much wound up the eighth and then uh, except for that morning, that's right before we went on work detail we all sat and listened to Franklin Roosevelt's address to the Congress asking for a declaration of war and to me personally that was a big morale booster to know that somebody is really behind us we're not really out here all by ourselves. And uh, and then on the ninth I was reassigned to the uh, heavy cruiser San Francisco for duty, along with a number of other men.

15:00

CD: Could you paint us a scene of what that was like when you were there listening to Roosevelt?

15:10

GR: Actually we were out on the lawn area outside recreation area, arena. And uh, I don't know, I was so concentrated on thinking or listening to what I was hearing...all I know everybody was quiet, everybody was concentrating and listening very intently. I think it was that way anywhere that there was any service personnel or any civilians for that matter, certainly everybody was tuned in.

15:46 **Crew pauses for noise in hallway**

15:58

CD: Did you ever get back on the West Virginia?

16:01

GR: No, I asked to go back but they only took back the uh se...er, some of the higher, the rated personnel, the chiefs and first class and uh, I was a fireman, second class fireman at the time so uh, I went on, stayed on the San Francisco, I was on it for 6 months when I got uh, rotated back to the uh, new construction in the states.

16:31

CD: Did you lose any friends?

16:35

GR: Yes, um, as I said my battle-station would have been in the after engine room and uh, none of that crew got out. It was uh, I don't know if the bulkhead was ruptured to the point where it flooded immediately or whether it was a streamline turned loose and killed everyone or what but uh, those people **(17:00)** that were in, that were on that station I knew pretty well. I don't know that we had personal friends, we had buddies but we didn't have personal friends per say, I didn't (laughs).

17:18

CD: What was your, were you involved with any part of the salvage operations?

17:24

GR: No, I, I knew, I knew a man who was, he stayed on and actually became one of the hardhat divers and worked on the salvage operation, but I did not, no.

17:37

CD: What's the single most vivid memory of Pearl Harbor for you?

17:43 - Crew pauses for sound.

17:55

GR: Gosh, I don't know...I think maybe, uh...being down in the motor room during the attack and the ship listing and realizing that we could possibly capsize and be trapped. I guess that was probably uh, the thing that impressed me the most at the time...I think I got a little blasé after that and when I saw all the damage like seeing the Arizona on fire and all the other damage. I guess you certainly say okay that's the way it is (laughs).

18:45

CD: How many people were in your battle-station when everything started happening?

18:50

GR: Uh, in the motor room I think we had about 12.

18:55

CD: What was the mood in the motor room as everything was going on?

19:00

GR: Probably fear (laughs). That was mine uh, I suspect everybody felt about like I did. Pretty helpless 'cause, you know, we had no, nothing to do but just be there and uh, just wait and see what happens...Helplessness.

19:27

CD: What do you think the lesson of Pearl Harbor is for us today?

19:34

GR: That's a big question, um, essentially don't be so naive and trusting...of anyone. Human nature being what it is...you don't know who can turn on you. Unfortunately that's the way it is as I see it.

19:58

CD: When you were (pause for sound in hallway)

20:59

CD: During the attack were you aware of the fate of your captain?

21:01

GR: No, I didn't know about it probably till the next day.

21:08

CD: How did you react when you heard the news?

21:11

GR: Well saddened of course uh, **Captain B...** had only been on the ship a short while and uh, 'course I didn't know him, never met him uh, our paths never crossed, but nonetheless saddened by the loss of anyone, in particular your captain.

21:30

CD: Did you hear the story about Dorris Miller?

21:34

GR: Years later uh, I didn't know the man and uh, I only knew some 80 odd men in our division, and that was about it, I'd only been about 6 months and that was about as far as I got acquainted.

21:53

CD: When you heard about Dorris's story, how did you feel what do you think, after all he was on your ship.

22:00

GR: Well I felt that it was uh, we should be proud of the man for what he did.

22:12

CD: When you were in the library and that bomb came down through the number 3 turret, aside from, I'm sure being petrified, what was going through your mind, what were you thinking..

22:27

GR: Where's the next one gonna hit? No, uh, we got, I think we took another torpedo while I was in there. I know we took a pretty heavy jolt and it was hard to distinguish between one hit and another and when the Arizona blew I'm sure that the concussion was felt throughout the whole battleship row. And of course we were pretty close. So I don't know if, which one of the concussions or which one of the uh, noises I heard and the **(23:00)** reverberations that was a torpedo and which one was which.

23:08

CD: Have you been back to the Memorial?

23:10

GR: Yes, several times.

23:14

CD: When you go out on the memorial and are standing over the Arizona, what thoughts go through your mind?

23:22

GR: Compassion...mostly. And a reminder, remembering what, you know, about what all happened. Mostly compassion for those who died.

23:42

CD: Do you recognize any of the names up on the wall?

23:44

GR: No, I didn't know anyone on the Arizona.

23:50

CD: There's a million and a half people who go to this memorial every year to learn about this event in our history. As someone who lived it, saw it, felt it, what would you say to them?

24:17

GR: I think, let this be a reminder to you that the world is only as safe as we make it. That you don't take anybody or anything for granted in this world.

24:40

CD: How has Pearl Harbor changed you personally?

24:46

GR: I'm sure it's changed me in a lot of ways I'm not aware of, but I know...Pearl Harbor and the subsequent fighting over the next 3 ½ years **(25:00)** generated a lot of bias in me and I'm sure I still hold a lot of it. Uh, bias against uh, not so much a people, as an ethic that they followed, why did they do it? What are all the reasons? And to me they don't add up to justification. And I'm biased. I was talking to some high school kids in a history class not long ago, and one of the questions came up, 'are you ever reminded of Pearl Harbor?' And I said 'just about anytime I see a Toyota or Mistubishi or a Nissan, yes I'm reminded of it.'

25:57 Crew holds

26:32

CD: Could you describe how you got from the West Virginia to Ford Island in detail?

26:34

GR: Yes, uh, it was normally it would have been a gangway but it had fallen into the water and the only way, if you could jump, you couldn't jump from one to the other because of the uh, safety lines that were up on both ships along the edge. So crawled over the lines and uh, and scooted across on the **hossers** **(27:00)** that tied the two ships together...the distance of

maybe 12, 15 feet and got on the Tennessee, across the Tennessee and got immediately onto the key that the Tennessee was tied to. And some of the men were diving in the water, with the oil and all the debris and everything and I thought that's not a very sensible thing to do so there was a lot of boats over to the side of the key, we just got an oil boat, about 10 or 12 of us and rowed it over the distance of maybe uh, 80, 100 feet and climbed up on a dredge line and walked on over to the beach.

27:46

CD: Sounds like you didn't even get your pants wet.

27:48

GR: No. Easy way.

28:03

CD: Is there anything I forgot to mention or ask that you think is important about your story and Pearl Harbor that should be shared?

28:16

GR: Let me put in a personal note, at the time I was uh, 19, not too much shy of my 20th birthday and uh, I did not feel that I was really in charge of uh, my life because of the Navy, I belonged to the Navy and I did what the Navy told me to do. But I had my personal uh, feelings about the uh, saturation that we were in. And uh, originally the dismay I think then turned into **(29:00)** comprehension and into uh, determination and uh, let's get things squared away here, and I think that was the general attitude of most everyone, I think we all went through that.

29:22

CD: Thank you very much.

29:30 - Room tone